

学校编码: 10384

分类号\_\_\_\_\_密级\_\_\_\_\_

学号: X2005110033

UDC \_\_\_\_\_

厦门大学

## 硕士学位论文

**Reconstruction of Invented History and Reformation of  
Traditional Culture**

**--- The Representation of Chinese Culture in *The Woman Warrior***

**by Maxine Hong Kingston**

虚拟历史的架构和传统文化的嬗变

---论汤亭亭的《女勇士》对中国文化的再现

颜 碧 洪

指导教师姓名: 张 龙 海 教授

专 业 名 称: 英 语 语 言 文 学

论文提交日期: 2008 年 10 月

论文答辩时间: 2008 年 月

学位授予日期: 2008 年 月

答辩委员会主席: \_\_\_\_\_

评 阅 人: \_\_\_\_\_

200 年 月

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## Abstract

Chinese American literature is a key product of the clash and integration of Chinese and western culture. The Chinese culture serves as the source and motive for the Chinese American writing, therefore the issue of cultural study is the focus of the Chinese American literature research. This paper aims to make a dialectical and objective comment on the representation of Chinese culture in *The Woman Warrior* by Maxine Hong Kingston.

It is said that literary creation is not always the loyal presentation of the reality. The writers always represent the reality in their own ways. Maxine Hong Kingston correspondingly uses her own way to interpret the Chinese culture in her representative work *The Woman Warrior*. She holds an innovative attitude toward Chinese culture in the work. Misreading the characters in Chinese legends, Kingston remolds them that would be more accepting in American society, and indirectly promotes the development of Chinese culture and the integration of Chinese and American culture. While she inherits the ancestral culture, she criticizes mercilessly the negative sides of Chinese culture. However, it should be realized that Kingston's critique is less objective and complete because of her dilettante knowledge of Chinese culture from her parents. Her writing is full of the Chinese cultural codes and cultural hybrids between two kinds of cultures. In this case, the authenticity of the Chinese culture reflected in Kingston's work has been doubted by readers, which inevitably results in the endless debates from the critics.

The paper consists of five parts. The introduction gives an overview of the development of Chinese American literature and the attitudes toward Chinese culture in different periods. The first chapter briefly introduces the biography of Kingston and summarizes *The Woman Warrior* and the various reviews on the cultural issue in this work. The second chapter deals with the misreading carried out in the work and sings highly of Kingston's creative representation of Chinese culture which finally develops the cultural conflicts into the cultural integration. The third chapter focuses on the writer's criticism on the negative sides of Chinese culture and points out that Kingston's criticism is subjective and mostly based on the American cultural core. The

biased criticism and subjective revision of Chinese myths or legends inevitably invites the heated debate on the cultural authenticity in Kingston's work. Finally, the conclusion part summarizes Kingston's writing purpose. Kingston's success is based on Chinese culture and she, in return, develops Chinese American culture as the derivative of Chinese culture. It is also worth noting that Kingston, on the other side, develops the ethnic literature and makes it an indispensable part of the American literature.

**Key words:** cultural representation; misreading; integration; criticism; authenticity



## 中文摘要

美国华裔文学是中西两种文化碰撞和杂交的产物。中国的文化在华裔文学作品中占据了主要的地位，同时也是美国华裔作家创作的源泉与动力，因而文化研究与探讨一直都是华裔文学研究的热点与重点。本文拟在以美国华裔作家汤亭亭的《女勇士》为例，辩证客观地评判该作品对中国传统文化的再现。

有道是，文学创作完全忠实于展现 (presentation) 现实是不可能的，作家永远都是在用他们自己的方式再现 (re-presentation) 现实。同样，汤亭亭也是以她自己的方式在她的代表作《女勇士》中再现中国的文化。在这再现的过程中，汤亭亭一直秉持着一种革新的态度来对待中国的文化。汤采用误读与重构的方式塑造出更易为美国现代读者所能接受的中国文化形象，从而促进了中国文化的发展和中美两种文化的融合。汤在继承中国传统文化的同时，也对中国文化的负面因素进行了批判，然而，由于汤对中国文化的懵懂和疑惑，因而对中国文化的批判难免存在着主观和片面，反映在作品上，则是对中国文化符号式的堆砌和中西文化冲突式的杂糅，这样无疑间削弱了作者所再现的中国文化的真实性，也不可避免地引发出评论界对该作品的无穷争议。

本文共分成五个部分。引言的部分主要是简要介绍美国华裔文学的发展以及各发展阶段对中国文化的态度。第一章是对汤亭亭的生平、作品《女勇士》以及评论界对该作品中文化议题的不同声音做一个简要的概述。第二章评述汤亭亭在《女勇士》中对中国文化的误读，肯定了汤借助文化误读的策略改写了中国的历史传说，使两种本是冲突对立的中西文化最终走向了融合。第三章是关于汤对中国文化负面因素的无情批判，然而汤的批判带有很强的主观意识以及美国社会的文化标准，并不真正适合中国的文化，因而又引发了评论界对汤作品《女勇士》的文化真实性的讨论。最后的结语总结归纳了汤发展美国华裔文化和文学的立场和创作目的。汤借助中国的文化取得了她的成功，而反过来她也促进了中国文化与美国文化的融合，使得中国文化不断衍生发展，创造出一种全新的美国华裔文化；在文化发展的同时，汤亭亭也促进了美国华裔文学的发展，使得美国华裔文学成为美国文学中的奇葩。

**关键词：**文化再现；误读；融合；批判；真实性

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## Introduction

Maxine Hong Kingston is one of the most prominent Chinese American writers. Her published books: two memoirs, *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood Among Ghosts* (1976) and *China Men* (1980), and a novel, *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* (1989) have earned her a myriad of honors and awards. However, more important than these is the cultural position she has assumed as a Chinese American writer. It's estimated that her work is the most anthologized of any living American writer and is read most by American college students of any Chinese American writer. Many readers, particularly Chinese Americans, look to her as a model or a type. Maxine Hong Kingston has become a representative of Chinese American literature. The proper examination of Maxine Hong Kingston and her work is indispensable to the understanding of Chinese American literature. Therefore, a critical study of Maxine Hong Kingston, focusing on the issue of cultural representation in *The Woman Warrior*, will be carried out in this essay.

“Representation” here is neither used in the sense of mimesis, which is almost synonymous with cultural representation claimed by American Orientalist to be full of “exotic” and “mysterious”, nor meant to be in full conformity with Chinese cultural reality. It's more likely to be interpreted in this thesis as “a performative act” as conceptualized by Wolfgang Iser that “the performative qualities through which the act of representation brings about something that hitherto did not exist as a given object” (Iser, 1987: 217). Although it's undeniable that a pre-existing social historical culture is very important to Chinese American literature, the ultimate goal of Chinese American literature is not just to mirror the acceptable Chinese culture but rather to change it through the agency of literature and to forge a new culture called Chinese American culture. For Chinese American writers, the role of literature is not just one of passive reflection but one of promoting the development of Chinese culture.

According to Wolfgang Iser, “every literary text inevitably contains a selection from a variety of social, historical, cultural, and literary systems that exists as referential fields outside the text” (1987: 207). In his theorization of performative representation, Iser foregrounds the importance of “the act of selection” in textual

representation. By selecting the elements to be represented, he points out,

Each text makes inroads into extratextual fields of reference and by disrupting them creates an eventful disorder, in consequence of which both structure and semantics of these fields are subject to certain deformations and their respective constituents are differently weighted according to the various deletions and supplementations. Thus each one is being reshuffled in the text, and takes on a new form (1985: 218).

In Chinese American literature, the selection process of Chinese or American culture is, of course, determined by Chinese American writers for their own benefits by purposefully foregrounding what they consider desirable in the selective process of cultural representation. Therefore, what deserves the readers' attention "is not so much the validity of representation as measure against the truth but how representation is manipulated to affect reality" (Zhao, 2004: 13).

Traced back to the initial development of Chinese American literature in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, *Ms. Spring Fragrance* written by Sui Sin Far raises the discussion of human nature, women status and children psychology; more importantly, it reveals the conflicts between two kinds of cultures and races. In this book, "Sui Sin Far exposes the wrongs done to the Chinese in America, and her writings consistently mirrored her developing identification with her Chinese roots. Her legacy lies in being 'a bridge between two worlds'" (Tian, 2006: 19). Another work *Fifth Chinese Daughter* by Jade Snow Wong in 1945 wins its miraculous success overnight, which encourages the understanding and appreciation between Chinese and western cultures. Despite of its immediate success and effort of publicizing Chinese cultures, this book is widely criticized to be deliberately catering for the tastes of the whites. The American-born autobiographer, though removed from Chinese culture,

May still capitalize on white curiosity by conducting the literary equivalent of a guided Chinatown tour: by providing explanations on the manners and mores of the Chinese American community from the vantage point of a "native" (Wong, 1998: 155).

In 1943, the Chinese Exclusion Act was finally repealed, a number of Chinese immigrants poured into America with the result of growing number of Chinese American writers and writings. However, these writings continued to cater for the reading tastes of the whites, and "politely show their disfavor on Chinese culture and their willingness to adopt the American lifestyle" (Tian, 2006:19). Pardee Lowe's *Father and the Glorious Son* (1943), Lin Yutang's *Chinatown Family* (1948), Ching

Yang Lee's *Flower Drum Song* as well as Jade Snow Wong's *Fifth Chinese Daughter* (1945) which has been mentioned above are considered to be seeking to satisfy American audience's curiosity about the strangers in their midst and oriental mysterious cultures. Wholly speaking, the writers in the first developmental period of Chinese American literature from the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century to the 1960s showed their convoluted attitudes toward Chinese cultures: on one side, they relied on their Chinese roots for their development with a nostalgia for Chinese cultures; while on the other side, they preferred their social being in America and claimed their disfavor and rejection to Chinese cultures.

Not until 1970s, was Chinese American literature in full flourish, marking the developmental period of maturity and prosperity. The transformation of American Immigration Act and the rise of the Civil Right Movement of 1960s as well as Women's Liberation Movement of 1970s led to great transformation in social, political, cultural and spiritual life of American people, which represented a significant step toward the development of multi-cultural democratic society. At that time, the trends of anti-tradition, anti-authority, anti-mainstream and searching for cultural identity were prevailing in the whole nation. Under the influence of the great changes of society, a number of Chinese American writers and their writings emerged as the times required. A new generation of Chinese American writers takes a drastically different approach to writing. Different from those in the first period, the writers at this time began to realize the benefits from their roots in Chinese cultures and their marginal and ethnic identities in America although they were trying to change them. With the great awareness of their embarrassing status, they didn't declare their rejection to Chinese cultures; on the contrary, they're making effort to integrate Chinese cultures into the western with the intention of popularizing Chinese cultures. In the process of convergence of two kinds of cultures, Chinese American writers adopted the manipulation or transformation to Chinese cultures which inevitably raised many disputes but eventually developed Chinese American literature and promoted people's interests in Chinese cultures.

Maxine Hong Kingston and Frank Chin can be claimed to be two outstanding representatives of Chinese American writers of this generation. The former won her fame with her autobiography *The Woman Warrior: Memoirs of a Girlhood among Ghosts* (1976) overnight. Her success marks an important milestone in Chinese

American literature development. Most of her works reflect on her cultural heritage. Maxine Hong Kingston tends to explore a new way of spreading Chinese cultures and seek the identities for Chinese Americans by deconstructing Chinese classic literature or traditions in her works. *China Men* expresses the Chinese American experience through family history combined with talk-story, memory, legend, and imaginative projection. It was also an interesting tossed salad of memoir, fable, reports and poetry. The writer artfully interspersed Chinese legends in the book here and there, turning the family history and literature into a work of art. *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* is a story about how Wittman Ah Sing, a Chinese American young people, experiences so much in order to figure out his own bicultural identity and his life long career. In this book Kingston combined Chinese myths, European literature with 1960s American language and pop arts. It is indeed what Skenazy calls “a culturally scattered and accumulative book” (Skenazy, 1998: 119). The protagonist Wittman Ah Sing in *Tripmaster Monkey: His Fake Book* not only embodies a successful blend of American culture and Chinese culture, but also conveys the author’s idea of claiming the American individual identity for Chinese American. The first name of “Wittman” is named after the well-known American poet “Whitman”; and “Ah Sing”, which by sound sense brings up “I sing myself”, the first line of Walt Whitman’s “Song of Myself”, a poem that had created an American identity and a beginning of American literature. Meanwhile, his last name “Ah Sing” makes his name sound like “Chinese”, but not really Chinese. Naming her protagonist in this way, Kingston creates a new model of cultural assimilation. She keeps the Chinese tradition of naming, but adds the new element of making the name western and acceptable. Such a creative name carries on both American and Chinese literary tradition, self-representation and protestation, celebrating the democratic spirit for Chinese American.

That is, in crossing the boundary from the ethnic minority community into the white mainstream of American society, *one does not have to sell out in order to fit in, one does not have to deny one’s ethnic heritage in order to create one’s individual self identity*. Instead, one may carry on the Chinese tradition that the individual has a “family responsibility” to “look for what’s going on in the world (Lin, 2007: 321).

Faced with a fake and interpreted Chinese history, Frank Chin has complained, “there is no recorded Chinese-American history from the Chinese point of the view” (Chan, 1991: 26). He then lets out the great “Aiiieeeee” breaking the long-suppressed



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